

Castlemaine Naturalist

July 2013

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Monthly newsletter of the
Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.



A Puffin in Castlemaine? No, Joy Weatherill has been to the other side of the world – see page 4

Observations and thoughts of an early European Naturalist

By Chris Timewell

I've recently been searching through the archives of the National Library of Australia (NLA) website. The NLA are in the process of scanning and digitizing all the old newspapers from across Australia using character recognition software (<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/home>). They rely on volunteers to check the spelling from this digitization process, which I've found to be an addictive way to while away an hour or three on your topic of choice.

Recently I came across an interesting letter to the editor written by Wm. H. Pennington, and published in the Saturday edition of the *Bendigo Advertiser* on 29 September in 1866. The letter, about hybridization between animal species, was inspired by observations he made '*in the vicinity of Sandy Creek, and about eight miles from the nearest habitation*'. While in this area, his two hunting dogs flushed '*nine young cats of about ten months' growth*' from a hollow log. He writes, '*three only out of the nine escaped the dogs by climbing up a sapling. At first sight I supposed they were tiger cats***, but on examination I discovered they were hybrids, having the dentition, head, face and upper extremities of the domestic cat, whilst the tails, posteriors, and lower portions of the body were beyond doubt those of the native cat. No trace of the marsupial could be discovered in the females, and these animals were doubtless the progeny of a male native and female domesticated cat. The furs of several were spotted, especially in the lower extremities, and had almost the luster and velvet like touch and appearance of ermine. The great beauty of two of the skins tempted me to remove them from the animals by way of trophies for utilization and experiment.'

** - 'Tiger Cat' is an early name for the Spot-tailed Quoll *Dasyurus maculatus*.

He then goes on to speculate about the capacity of hybrid animals in Australia to remain fertile, in contrast to the '*well-established fact*' in Europe and other parts of the world that '*hybrids animals will not breed or perpetuate their own species....*'. He used the widespread hybridization of the Australian dingo with the domestic dog as further supporting evidence against this '*theoretical scientific book-knowledge*' from Europe being applicable in Australia. He also briefly describes how the opossum will '*freely cross with native animals of the same or approximate type and different genera*'.

While it is tempting to scoff at this speculation with hindsight, and it does seem highly improbable that he observed a quoll-domestic cat hybrid, I appreciate his attempts to better understand the natural world around him in a vacuum of knowledge and information on the ecology of most Australian fauna at the time. Somewhat depressingly, some of the suggestions and observations he makes elsewhere within his letter to the editor would not be out of place almost 150 years later in a newspaper in 2013. For example:

'...science is...inadequately represented in the columns of a daily or weekly newspaper, (which are) engrossed by political or mercantile pursuits almost exclusively...'; and,

'...comparatively little or nothing is known practically of the varied phenomena of our marsupiata. The fact is, we are entirely ignorant of the pathology, longevity and sexual physiology of our marsupiata, and know little or nothing concerning their habits and mode of life en naturae, so that a wide, fertile and exceedingly interesting field for scientific observation still lies open to the inquiring naturalist and student of nature for ages to come...'

He perhaps also predicts the need for the internet and computer-based databases when he writes, '*...the great desideratum perhaps being some suitable medium for transcribing all intelligent observations on the physical phenomena of this great continent...*', although it could be argued that the internet is not so selective about the quality of the observations that it documents!

Is anyone game to speculate on the identity of the 'hybrid' marsupial described above? I'd be happy to email through the full letter from Mr Pennington if anyone is interested. And to finish with the same words as his fascinating letter, 'apologies for so great a trespass upon your valuable space.'

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Calling all Field Nats Members!

On **Wednesday 10th July**, all Castlemaine Field Nats members are invited to help plant indigenous species in the **Castlemaine Botanic Gardens** newly created 'Box-Ironbark Forest' garden bed.

We'll help with the planting from 10am to 11am and then have some morning tea provided by the Mount Alexander Shire Council.

A photographer from the Elliot Midland papers will be invited along to take some snaps, so make sure you wear your best gardening cloths!

The new Box-ironbark Forest bed will be planted out with species that are all indigenous to the landscape within 15km of the Botanical Gardens. They are being planted to showcase our local flora. The garden bed will be complemented by an interpretive sign displaying information about Box-Ironbark Forest flora. Once the plants are bigger there are also plans to have identification labels against them so that visitors to the gardens can learn their names.

All of the plants for the garden have been grown by Field Nats member Frances Cincotta (Newstead Natives) – so they're sure to be local, hardy and healthy!

This will be an enjoyable morning in lovely surrounds and a good chance to promote the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, as well as our local plants.

Contact Max Schlachter (max@connectingcountry.org.au, 0422 130 055) if you have any questions.

No need to RSVP, just meet at the Tea Room car park at 10 am.

The Back Creek Siphon excursion – June 15

Chris Timewell

Birds and other animals seen and heard along the channel walk - in bushland and adjacent paddocks and farm dams. From Back Ck crossing towards Taradale for ~1-2 km.

Start time: 1015; Finish Time: 1130

Common Bronzewing
Australian Magpie
Eastern Yellow Robin
Little Raven
Red-browed Finch
White-browed Scrubwren
Silvereye
Pacific Black Duck
Crimson Rosella
Red Wattlebird
Willie Wagtail
White-throated Treecreeper
Laughing Kookaburra
Galah

Striated Thornbill
Weebill
Golden Whistler
Varied Sitella
Buff-rumped Thornbill
Whistling Kite (3 overhead)
White-faced Heron (2 in pools along channel, then flying up to roost in bushland - an unusual site)
Wedge-tailed Eagle (1 overhead)
Long-billed Corella
Yellow Thornbill
* European Goldfinch
Eastern Grey Kangaroo

A Visit to the The Farne Islands

Joy Weatherill

The Farne Islands are a group of about 20 (depending on the state of the tide) islands off the coast of Northumberland in England. On 8th May this year, I was lucky enough to have a two hour visit to each of Staple Island in the Outer Group and Inner Farne in the Inner Group. The islands are home to about 160,000 nesting birds - 23 species of bird; with a total of 290 bird species recorded, including about 37,000 pairs of Puffins. They are also home to a large grey seal colony, with more than 1,000 pups born every autumn. The breeding season is May, June, July, but because of the extended winter this year, breeding began later, so that the time of my visit, no young had hatched.

The islands have no permanent population, the only residents being a few National Trust Rangers. Boats leave from Seahouses, a fishing village on the mainland, and arrivals are monitored by the National Trust.

Birds I saw (and I include information on numbers which have been recorded)

- . Common Eider (443 pairs)
- . Pied Oyster catcher (39 pairs)
- . Black-headed Gull (461 pairs)
- . Black-legged Kittiwake (4241 pairs)
- . Shag (965 pairs)
- . Guillemot (49,076 birds)
- . Razorbill (365 pairs)
- . Puffin (36,285 pairs)
- . Ringed plover (4 pairs)



One Ranger I spoke with said they were conducting a Puffin census this year, as they have done every five years since 1939 when 3,000 breeding pairs were recorded. This spring and summer a team of 11 National Trust Rangers will be conducting a careful count - putting their arms into each hole (puffins nest in underground burrows) to make sure that the nests are occupied. Until 2008, each survey since the census began 65 years ago showed a steady increase in pairs of puffins on the Farne Islands, but the last count indicated numbers had fallen by a third. Rangers fear that extreme cold weather this winter which has led to a higher than average mortality rate, may effect numbers. Results of the census will be known some time in July. At the time of my visit they had counted 35,000 pairs.

On 2nd July, the National Trust reported that the first egg had hatched - this would have been obvious with parents leaving burrows and returning with mouth-fulls of fish.

Staple Island which I visited, is very exposed, built up from resistant igneous Dolerite outcrops, which form strong eroded columns. Many of the small islands

are bare rock, but the larger islands like Staple and Inner have a layer of subsoil and peat soil supporting vegetation. On Staple, I only noticed low grassy vegetation. The day I was there it was freezing cold, and with a very strong wind, and despite all the layers of clothing, I was nearly numb with cold and was having trouble standing steadily while filming. I had brought lunch and a hot drink (no facilities at all) which I consumed while crouching in a small depression.

Puffins are such cute birds - more like wind-up toys, with an unusually marked beak and iridescent orange legs and feet. The puffins were mainly spread over the grassy areas of the island where they had their burrows, while Guillemots tended to be crammed together on outcrops of rocks. Birds such as Razorbills and Kittiwakes were nesting on small ledges created by the rock formations. There was a lot of noise - apart from the howling wind; and black rock surfaces were stained white with the guano.

Arctic terns were supposedly just arriving, but I did not see any. Nesting Arctic terns will attack visitors who come too close and people are strongly advised to wear hats.

The other island I visited was Inner Farne. There were Puffins and Guillemots here too, but also Black-headed Gulls; and I photographed a Ringed Plover on the shoreline of a small beach.

The first visitor recorded by name to visit the Farne Islands, was St. Aiden in AD 640 followed by St. Cuthbert. After two years, St. Cuthbert retired to a cell on Inner Farne (a small chapel built in 1370 now stands on this spot) where he died in 687. St. Cuthbert introduced special laws in 676 protecting the Eider ducks and other sea-birds nesting on the islands. These are thought to be the earliest bird protection laws anywhere in the world.

On some of the islands there are rabbits which were introduced as a source of meat and have since gone wild (sound familiar?). Rabbits and puffins use the same burrows at different times - the puffins being strong enough (with a vicious bite) to evict the rabbits from the burrows during the nesting season.

David Steel, Head Ranger for the Farne Islands said that David Attenborough had told them recently that the Farnes during the breeding season were his favourite place in the UK to see magnificent wild life. The boat trip back to the mainland was fairly rough. We were all sitting very quietly; then someone said "where are the life vests?" After looking around, we realised they were in the benches on which we were sitting! The next day's trip was cancelled due to rough weather; so I feel I was really lucky to see something so amazing.

Reference:

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/farne-islands/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farne_Islands

Check out the National Trust to get the final count on the Puffin census and see the film footage of a puffin giving birth to an egg down a burrow; or check out Wikipedia to find out about "Elsie" the Lesser Crested Tern who nested on the Farnes for a number of years - should have been nesting on islands off the coast of Libya - they thought she must have taken a wrong "tern".





Eider duck pair



Paired Shags sort
out nesting material



Standing room only
for Guillemots

In Search of Swift Parrots

Rita Mills

The winter Swift Parrot - Regent Honeyeater weekend survey is being held on Saturday and Sunday August 3 and 4. Again the more teams we have to go out in search the better. It was decided to ask you to form your own teams. Connecting Country has a survey sheet available on the internet. I googled "Swift Parrot Survey", chose 18-19 May 2013 Survey weekend, and clicked on the data sheet "click here" spot. Send your sheets to the Secretary at the CFNC post box number. (back page)

To help us all understand what we need to watch out for, and listen for, I have got Simon Kennedy's permission to use his notes on -

A winter day in the life of a Swift Parrot

- 1) Early Morning**-gathered in a large group (often 50-100 birds) at a roost site. Wake up, preen, do a few laps and then fly high (often 100-200 metres up) to the feeding area
- 2) Morning**-arrive at feeding area and forage actively and noisily in the canopy-the best time for the scientist to find their foraging areas.
- 3) Midday**-become quiet. Sit in trees giving quiet gurgling calls. Preen. Fly occasionally but not far.
- 4) Mid-afternoon**- Second round of foraging activity - not as noisy as morning and a shorter period.
- 5) Late afternoon**- Becoming noisy and seemingly unsettled, then rather suddenly burst upwards from trees, fly well above canopy back to roost site.
- 6) Evening**- return to roost site, do a few laps, with groups in the air gradually increasing in size as more birds arrive from various foraging locations. Drop down into roost site (usually a dense stand of eucalypt seedling regrowth, sometimes dense coppice regrowth). Often only 1-3 metres from the ground. "Pinking" call stops, and birds begin to make gurgling call - this gradually fades as dark falls.

Working with DSE at the time, Simon was the Swift Parrot co-ordinator for three or four years and in that time learnt a great deal of their behaviour as he spent hours more out in the bush looking for and watching them as he assembled his notes for his Honours project, than was expected of him. He was always fascinated by them, and still has a soft spot for the 'Swifties'. Later, after he left the project he learnt much more from Debbie Worland, who went out with her new video/still camera and showed us more behavioural habits and food sources that anyone had even imagined – and you'll find that Debbie, too, has developed a very soft spot for these fascinating little parrots.

Predation of the Swift Parrot

Noel Young

As if they haven't enough to contend with, it has been revealed by researchers that Sugar Gliders enter their nests at night and eat both incubating females and their eggs. Motion activated cameras at nests across Eastern Tasmania have confirmed that this is a common occurrence, and "in some locations, predation... was as high as 70 – 100%" It is thought that Sugar Gliders were introduced to Tasmania from the mainland in the 19th century. Dejan Stojanovic of the ANU is quoted as saying "one of the urgent priorities for future research is to look at how land management practices impact the risk of predation by Sugar Gliders"

- For more details see Australian Birdlife June 2013, p 14

Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater Surveys in the Mt Alexander Shire - May 2013

By Chris Timewell

The weekend of the 18-19 May 2013 was the first of the two annual survey weekends for the threatened Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) and the Regent Honeyeater (*Anthochaera phrygia*) across south-eastern mainland Australia. In a team of four with Lisa Minchin, Jan Hall and Max Schlachter, we conducted some short bird surveys within the eastern parts of the Mt Alexander Shire on the morning of the 19 May. Relatively few areas were found to have any flowering eucalypts, and birds of any type were few and far between. Although we neither saw nor heard the two target species, an enjoyable time was had bird-watching at the following picturesque locations:

1. The old dam within the Taradale Nature Conservation Reserve was devoid of waterbirds, however, there were a few woodland birds seen in the surrounding slopes during a 30 minute search.
2. A gully near the western side of the Metcalfe Reserve (alongside the Metcalfe-Taradale Road) was quiet during a 20 minute check.
3. A 35 minute morning tea break at the Metcalfe Cascades didn't reveal many birds, but was a nice spot for a cup over tea and biscuits.
4. Our last spot was at Turpin Falls in the Barfold / Langley area. The track down to the falls finished at the lookout due to maintenance or damage to the route below. From the lookout, we could see a couple of waterbirds in the pool below, but the highlight was certainly a brief view of a large Water Rat swimming around. The birds around the car-park were the most interesting of the day, with numerous Red-browed Finchs, Superb Fairy-wrens, thornbills, pardalotes and robins.

The full results of our search are provided below, which includes the number of individuals seen at each site, flying overhead ('OH') or heard only ('H'). The next official Swift Parrot-Regent Honeyeater survey will be on the first weekend in August. Details on the survey weekends are available from the Birdlife Australia website:

(<http://www.birdlife.org.au/projects/woodland-birds-for-biodiversity/latest-news>)

Location	1	2	3	4
Start Time	846	925	955	1055
Finish Time	916	945	1030	1140
Birds				
Australasian Grebe	-	-	-	1
Wedge-tailed Eagle	-	-	2 OH	-
Dusky Moorhen	-	-	-	3
Galah	-	-	-	2
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	-	-	3	-
Crimson Rosella	6	1	2	4
Laughing Kookaburra	-	-	-	1
White-throated Treecreeper	1	1	-	-
Superb Fairy-wren	-	-	-	4
Spotted Pardalote	H	H	H	H
Striated Pardalote	-	-	-	H
Brown Thornbill	-	-	-	2
Buff-rumped Thornbill	-	H	-	-
Striated Thornbill	5	H	-	-
Red Wattlebird	-	-	H	-
White-eared Honeyeater	H	-	-	-
Brown-headed Honeyeater	2	-	-	-
Flame Robin	-	-	-	5
Eastern Yellow Robin	1	1	-	-
Grey Shrike Thrush	H	1	-	-
Australian Magpie	-	-	3	1
Grey Currawong	1	-	-	
Australian Raven	-	-	-	H
Red-browed Finch	-	-	-	2
Welcome Swallow	-	-	-	1
Silvereye	-	-	1	-
* Common Blackbird	-	-	H	-
Mammals				
Water Rat	-	-	-	1

From the business meeting:

An extended call for any overlooked subscriptions – if the date on your address label of the newsletter is not 02/14, then your subscription has expired. If you wish to continue to receive the newsletter, please forward your sub ASAP.

Worth a look if you are in Bendigo – Chris Cope's photographic exhibition of Australian birds and orchids at the Capital, 50 View st., until 2nd August.

Observations for May – Denis Hurley

May 1 Golden Whistler at bird bath

May 6 2 Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters at bird bath

May 9 Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters, E Yellow Robin *Eopsaltia australis*, White-naped Honeyeater, White-eared Honeyeater, Red Wattlebird

May 15 Pair White-browed Scrubwrens on back porch and still working under house drew attention to a very sick possum which came out and followed me. Gave it some food but could not save it.

May 17 Pair Eastern Rosella – back yard and bird bath. Very shy, but have been around a lot lately.

May 19 Pair Scarlet Robins *Petroica multicolor*

May 29 8 Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters – (probably some juveniles in group), and an Eastern Spinebill *Acanthorhynchus superciliosus*

May 31 pm. - Eastern Spinebills (2 males?) working potted Correa and Eremophilla on the back porch.

Observations

- ◆ Reports at the June meeting -
- ◆ Ravens building a nest in the Uniting Church gardens
- ◆ Last regular bird count at Doveton Street turned up 27 Silvereyes, even more Red Wattlebirds, about 20 Currawongs and two Blue-faced Honeyeaters - Ern Perkins
- ◆ Up to 20 Red-browed Finches, lots of Blue Wrens and 3 Spinebills around the house lately – Denis Hurley
- ◆ Yellow tailed Black Cockatoos are down from the high country – 50 or more seen at Wesley Hill recently – Kit Morris
- ◆ A Common Wombat was caught on a remote surveillance camera recently by Connecting Country staff at Sutton Grange. Road kills have also been reported, but good to see a live one – Max S.
- ◆ Late June – Pied Currawongs in the yard and Cranberry Heath in flower – George Broadway

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

July 2013

Wed July 10 Botanical Gardens planting 10 am.

Fri July 12 meeting: speaker JULIAN HOLLIS – local geology

Sat July 13 field trip: Lushington - leader Julian Hollis

Sat/Sun August 3, 4: Swift Parrot-Regent Honeyeater survey

Fri August 9 meeting: speaker to be confirmed

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 7.30 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at George Broadways; 24a Greenhill Ave., at 7.30 pm. Members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2013

Ordinary membership: Single \$30, Family \$40

Pensioner or student: Single \$25, Family \$30

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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